

Expository Text in Literature Circles

Will expository text work in literature circles? Well, that depends on what you mean by “expository.”

Back in the early 1980s, a few smart teachers like Jerry Harste and Karen Smith started importing the idea of adult book clubs into the schools. Building on the model of the grown-up reading groups, they began translating the structure for younger readers in classrooms. And it worked. It turned out that kids could pick their own books, form into small groups, and meet regularly to share ideas, feelings, questions, connections, and judgments about books they had read.

Twenty years later, it seems like *everybody* is doing something called “literature circles.” What used to be homegrown innovation in a few scattered schools has become a national trend, a boom, almost a fad. Today, tens of thousands of teachers are inviting students to form small reading groups where the kids choose interesting books and run their own discussions about them. If you do the math, this means that *millions* of American students are now involved in some kind of literature circle program. Wow.

But the whole literature circle phenomenon has been pretty much driven by fiction. The vast majority of student book clubs around the country, kindergarten through high school, are still focused on narrative fiction—from picture books to chapter books, from short stories to novels. Maybe the name itself has been part of the problem; calling this activity “literature circles” may have given the impression that it only works with fiction.

Now teachers (especially middle level teachers) are asking if expository text will work with literature circles. Can we open our students’ book clubs to the wide world beyond novels—biographies, information books, essay collections, science adventures, travelogues, biographies, muckraking exposés, memoirs, and all the rest? And why restrict our book clubs to novels in language arts class? Can’t we have kids read informational books in social studies, science, art, and maybe even mathematics? What a great way to integrate the curriculum, by establishing discussion groups among kids who’ve read authentic texts about history, ecology, medicine, cultures, conflicts, pathfinders, or alternative futures. And what good preparation for life outside of school, where as citizens, workers, and parents, our students will need to actively interpret a lifelong flood of important nonfiction texts.

There’s an added urgency, too. Teachers have an immediate incentive to try nonfiction literature circles because standardized reading tests contain 70–80% expository text. We know that our students’ reading experience is already overbalanced with stories, and they need much more practice with nonfiction. Our habitual classroom emphasis on fiction literature, while laudable on humanistic grounds, becomes pretty self-defeating when state-mandated tests of nonfiction reading are used to evaluate young people—and their teachers. So now teachers are hoping that kids who talk about nonfiction in book clubs will be “warming up” for the informational passages on high-stakes tests later on.

Well, the quick answer is *yes*, you can use expository texts in literature circles. It’s not just novels anymore. Across the country, in real class-

rooms, teachers are finding a wide range of non-fiction—both books and articles—that spark energetic, thoughtful, and sustained discussions in student-led book clubs. In just a minute, we'll talk about some of these specific titles, along with the management ideas that can make them come alive. But teachers have also crashed and burned with other expository texts, ones that bombed in book clubs, big time. So before we get too excited, we need to define this enormous *genus* called “expository” and determine which of its *species* will “work” in book clubs and which ones may not.

What Is Expository Text?

Pick up any standard description of expository text and you'll find a simple, clear-cut description. “Expository text,” intones one state curriculum guide, “is text that informs or persuades.” Okay, simple enough. But there's more. On its Web site, the National Education Association warns: “Unlike stories that have plot, characters, setting, problem, and resolution, informational text has many different structures; the only unifying factor is that they are organized around topics and details.” Hmmm. This is getting a little complicated. Exactly what are those “many different structures”?

Well, look in almost any language arts textbook, curriculum guide, or state standards document, and you'll find a list of “different structures” that are supposed to be skeletons of expository text:

Cause / Effect

Compare / Contrast

Pro / Con

Problem / Solution

Definition / Categorization

Order / Sequence / Procedure

Description / Listing

The unanimity is comforting; everyone seems to agree that these are the official building blocks of nonfiction. And if we accept that expository text is organized in these ways, it's easy enough to design a curriculum that teaches these structures to

students, working on the assumption that the conscious awareness of such patterns will enhance comprehension. But are we really on the right track? Are we sure that most expository text is organized according to this finite set of simple patterns? Maybe we'd better check before we start printing up stacks of handouts and organizing our whole teaching lives around these models.

So, where do we look for some pure and straightforward expository text? How about the daily newspaper? That should be a veritable font of exposition. Let's see, today's *Chicago Tribune* (February 10, 2002) has four big stories on the front page. The first one looks like classic expository text. Under the headline “Deputies' Abuse Cases Cost County,” the piece begins:

Lawyers representing the office of Cook County Sheriff Michael Sheehan have recommended settling at least 35 lawsuits that accused deputies of brutality, citing convincing evidence that beatings took place, according to confidential reports obtained by the *Tribune*. The Cook County state's attorney's office, which typically represents Sheehan in court, worried that it could lose at trial because sheriff's personnel had falsified jail reports, lost documents, or provided untruthful or contradictory accounts.

Just as forecast in its opening lines, the article goes on to provide detail and examples for each of three enumerated elements (falsified documents, lost documents, and untruthful police accounts). The 37-word opening sentence is a little much (cramming the who/what/when/where/why into one sentence) but, all in all, this is a pretty good example of expository text using a description/listing pattern.

But wait a minute. There are three other major stories on today's front page—one about excessive patriotism at the winter Olympic Games, another covering the recent surge of high-tech job layoffs, and a third heralding the invention of “heelers,” shoes with built-in wheels. Here's how these three stories begin in the *Tribune*:

Ski moguls fan Mary Berdoulay of Pasadena, California, carried a brand new red, white, and blue blanket in her arms and a small American flag in her hand, while her husband Roger toted another flag. “We've got it all,” she said.

Emmanuel Sacks considered himself lucky. As a computer worker in a surging information economy, the 31-year-old father of four never had trouble finding work. Then came his layoff twelve months ago from a \$62,500-a-year job at a Virginia subsidiary of Chicago's MarchFirst, Inc., the now-defunct Internet consultancy.

To get to his friend's house down the street, 15-year-old Michael D'Amico just lifts his toes and rolls, sometimes as fast as 15 to 20 miles an hour. His red and black tennis shoes, which he hardly ever takes off unless forced to, are stealth skates. Tucked into each heel is a single, removable wheel.

As we read further into these three articles, we find much more complex, diverse, and recursive organizational patterns than the trusty old curriculum guides led us to expect. There is a welter of structures used in each piece, with the authors seeming to slide between one and another, a paragraph at a time, without warning. After an opening vignette, there might be a paragraph listing some items of import, followed by another vignette, told chronologically; then there might be the posing of a problem and some possible solutions, followed by a sequence of past events, a list of examples just piled on top of each other, and then still more narrative. All these articles seem to be organizational hybrids; nothing is simple or straightforward.

Not only do all three articles use multiple text structures, some of their most evident organizing ingredients look suspiciously like those used in fiction. Each piece introduces a handful of individuals who stand for classes of people affected by trends or events; essentially, they serve as characters. Along with these people/characters, each article establishes one or more clear-cut settings. And all three stories contain large segments of chronological narrative telling how events happened.

A Continuum of Expository Text

So we find that the real expository texts roaming around the world can represent a more diverse covey of critters than we thought. Turns out there are a zillion kinds of expository texts, and many of them use complex and recursive organizational patterns that cannot be easily described, much less

taught to 13-year-olds. Even worse, some of these supposedly nonfiction texts boldly cross the border into narrative-land, borrowing story elements supposedly reserved for fiction.

Figure 1 is a crude attempt to display some different types of expository texts on a continuum that ranges from text with simple, consistent organizational patterns and a high proportion of information to those with complex, multiple-organizational patterns and a blend of information and "story." I have no illusion that all possible text types have been included in this array, or that the exact placement of any one is "correct."

Most of these categories employ everyday terminology; the only made-up term is "narrated nonfiction." This is meant to cover literature like *The Magic School Bus* books or *Ranger Rick* magazine, informational texts where the content is delivered through a personal voice. Sometimes this involves a direct address to the reader: "Imagine you are standing at the edge of the ice-field, looking up at your first glacier!" Or it can emanate from a character who leads you into the content: "My name is Dr. Bob McKay. I am a herpetologist, which means I study reptiles. Today, I am looking for salamanders." While this pattern may seem heavy-handed in young people's literature, it's a trusty tool of magazine writers everywhere: "Gwyneth Paltrow sits at a back table in Starbucks, absently stirring her decaf latte and talking about dreams. She looks much smaller, paler, and more fragile than on the big screen. . . ."

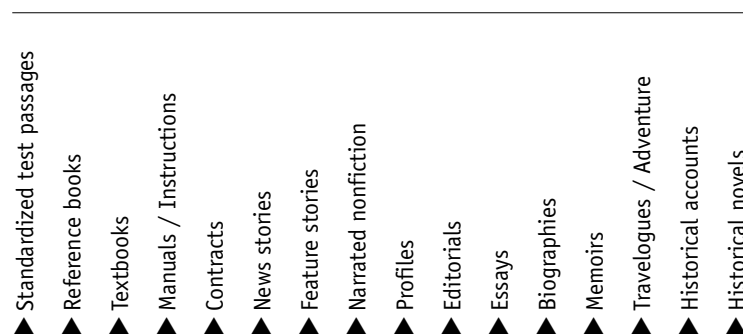


Figure 1. Examples of expository text ranging from simple, factual organizational patterns to complex organizational patterns where fact is blended with "story"

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Well, then, what about the kinds of expository texts described in our state guidelines, the ones that use the simple organizational schemes listed in the professional literature, the ones that appear in standardized reading tests? Well, circularly enough, there are really only two places where such text is prevalent: on standardized tests and in school textbooks. While they differ in length, both of these *species* of the *genus* “expository” often employ simple patterns of organization, eschew story elements, and contain maximally packed content loads—and thus sit at the far end of the spectrum.

This helps us understand why literature circles don’t work with textbooks. So many teachers have tried hitching peer-led discussion groups to that dense and uncompromising genre, and so many have been disappointed. They have found that the review of quadratic equations in Chapter 18 doesn’t evoke quite the same spirited discussion or free-ranging conversation as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. You certainly don’t see kids laughing or crying over the math textbook, sharing a deep emotional experience—that is, unless they have digressed pretty far from the book. (Well, they might be crying because they don’t understand it.) Come to think of it, no one goes in a bookstore, buys a math textbook, and stays up all night reading it straight through: “I just couldn’t put it down!” And *Algebra II* has never topped *The New York Times* best-seller list, that I know of.

Most school textbooks simply don’t contain the kind of rich, complexly structured expository text we might find in *Rolling Stone* magazine or a good popular nonfiction book. Instead, they are crudely structured compendiums, storage systems for vast amounts of information, constructed without serious regard to engaging their readers. Textbooks usually don’t use story elements to support their readers; instead, they simply pile up information as densely as possible. The point is: textbooks are reference books, and are a good place to look up information when you need it. Unfor-

tunately, this is not how textbooks are often used in school. Instead, we act as if they were novels that kids should be able to plow right through, remembering and caring about what they read.

Some teachers buck these realities and set up “textbook circle” groups in their classrooms. They figure that if textbooks must be assigned, at least the kids can work through them in supportive groups. Sometimes these teachers chop textbooks into small sections, jigsawing pieces out to student groups that can operate in literature-circle-like fashion. This rarely has the energy or zest of a real Lit Circle, but at least kids have the opportunity to work with friends, set their own schedules, and have some responsibility and voice. Collaboration has a lot of social power; people can do jobs together that they can’t do nearly so well alone. But when the tasks are mundane and convergent—like memorizing facts—even the magic of small-group process tends to fade. At best, “textbook circles” can generate compliant and mechanical meetings; at worst (and much more commonly), they deteriorate into boredom and off-task behavior. Not even the best-structured group activities can bring real energy to content that is rote, predetermined, and unimaginative.

This whole textbook problem reminds us of a larger issue in literacy education: we need to change not just *how* we teach reading, but *what* we ask kids to read. We need to use textbooks and reference books more appropriately (and sparingly), and instead infuse the curriculum with authentic, real-world nonfiction—the kind of informational, expository, persuasive texts that adults really read. Luckily, textbooks are just the foam on the ocean of nonfiction. The world is full of fascinating, important, debatable, and sometimes inflammatory nonfiction, from partisan magazines to primary source materials to revisionist histories—for readers of all ages.

Selecting Nonfiction That Works in Literature Circles

When we are organizing “nonfiction reading circles” for middle level kids, we want to pick from

the right side of the continuum. In order to sustain both careful reading and lively conversation among young people, we need material that has more than “facts and details.” If nonfiction circles are going to be as successful as literature circles, kids need texts that are “discussable,” meaning that they have *some* of these ingredients:

- content that is important or engaging
- people we can care about
- a narrative structure or chronological line
- places we can visualize
- danger, conflicts, risks, or choices
- value, moral, ethical, or political dimensions
- some ideas that reasonable people can debate, dispute, or disagree about.

Where do we find such texts? Twenty years ago, we had a hard time locating rich nonfiction selections for young people. Now, that gap has largely been closed.

Start with easier reading; there are countless biographies of historical figures, as well as contemporary sports and entertainment stars. There are how-to books, adventure tales, and great science series like the *Eyewitness* books. Jerry Stanley’s *Children of the Dust Bowl* and other historical titles are attractive, engaging, and well illustrated. There are tons of historical novels at all reading levels, and there’s no better curriculum integration tool than a book like *Morning Girl* (exploration and conquest), *What’s the Big Idea, Ben Franklin?* (the colonial era), or *Bud, Not Buddy* (the Depression). The literature on the Holocaust, immigration, and the history of different American ethnic groups are especially strong.

When kids need instruction in small-group discussion, or when time is limited, or when you haven’t yet assembled multiple-copy sets of nonfiction books, then articles are the thing. And we need to build our own collection of kid favorites. We must scour the newspapers and magazines for relevant pieces for our kids, realizing that every

school subject worth teaching gets “covered” in the popular press, if we know where to look. Richard Allington’s new book, *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers* (Longman, 2001), makes a stirring case for the importance of magazines in a balanced reading diet, and lists scores of the top periodicals for kids of different ages. We can feed our kids’ discussion groups with articles about air pollution in the community, the role of serotonin in brain function, the latest genetic engineering breakthrough, racial quotas in police department hiring, or a controversial art exhibit.

There are also lots of helpful published nonfiction collections, many of which feature short and easy selections. *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* offers short bits of helpful lore and wisdom and is a standard in our Chicago middle school book clubs. *National Geographic’s* new *Reading Expeditions* collection features a variety of rich, engaging 40-page magazines; among the most discussable titles are *Feeding the World*, *The Human Machine*, *The Great Migration*, and *Kids Care for the Earth*. A similar line of magazine-books from *Time for Kids* offers high-interest, well-illustrated nonfiction that parallels what appears in contemporary magazines.

If you can get past the name, the *Uncle John’s Bathroom Readers* are a terrific source of quickie nonfiction, much of it worth discussing. Each *Uncle John* book contains hundreds of short (one paragraph to three pages) fact-filled pieces on a weird and wide array of fascinating topics: Where did the Miss America pageant come from? Why do wintergreen Life Savers make sparks when you bite them in the dark? Was Henry Ford really an anti-Semite? The *Uncle John* series is now up to 13 volumes, all of which ought to sit right beside the encyclopedias in every middle school classroom. A little more grownup in content and reading level are the collections *In Short* and *In Brief*, both edited by Judith Kitchen and Mary Jones, which include fine writers reflecting on assorted topics: how hummingbirds fly, the nature of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), and why white people can’t cook. A collection of longer pieces, *The Best American Magazine Writ-*

ing, 2001 features Robert Kurson's look back at his favorite teacher, who turns out to be a serial killer.

Moving on to recent nonfiction titles, there's plenty to choose from. A recent book that teenagers can really connect with—and argue vigorously

about—is Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2001). Like any good exposé, the book is jammed with thousands of facts, including these:

Every day in the US, roughly 200,000 people are sickened by food-borne disease, 900 are hospitalized and 14 die.

Teenage boys who work more than 20 hours a week in fast food restaurants are more likely to develop substance abuse problems and commit crimes than kids without such jobs.

Fast food advertising is designed to get children to nag their parents for burgers and fries. The industry has studied and categorized seven different types of child nagging: pleading, persistent, forceful, demonstrative, sugar-coated, threatening, and pity.

At one Iowa slaughterhouse, the official OSHA log shown to federal inspectors recorded only 160 accidents and injuries in a three-month period; the company's secret log recorded over 1600 incidents, a discrepancy of more than 1,000%.

Shocking as these facts are, they would lose our interest pretty fast if simply piled on top of each other. But *Fast Food Nation* has a setting, a plot, characters, a theme, and a kind of resolution. Though it is unquestionably packed with details, statistics, and examples—it is also a great *story*, with the same ingredients as any good narrative.

In Kathy LaLuz's seventh-grade class in Chicago, the kids' book clubs have been discussing selections from *Remembering Slavery* by Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven Miller (1998). The book is a compilation of interviews of former slaves from all parts of the South. The autobiographical accounts, which were transcribed from conversations with former slaves by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s, provide first-person testimony, sometimes harrowing, sometimes puzzling, from the era of American slavery. For Kathy's kids, this is more than a good nonfiction choice for literature circles: it is also a matter of understanding and honoring their own ancestors. For younger readers, a version of the same material called *Slavery Times: When I Was Chillun* has been edited by Belinda Hurmence 1997.

As young readers grow stronger, the whole world of adult nonfiction opens up. The students

NONFICTION DISCUSSION SHEET

Name _____

Title of Reading _____

Author _____

While you are reading or after you have finished reading, please prepare for the group meeting by doing the following:

Connections: What personal connections did you make with the text? Did it remind you of past experiences, people, or events in your life? Did it make you think of anything happening in the news, around school, or in other material you have read?

Discussion questions: Jot down a few questions you would like to discuss with your group. They could be questions that came to your mind while reading, questions you'd like to ask the author, questions you'd like to investigate, or any other questions you think the group might like to discuss.

Passages: Mark some lines or sections in the text that caught your attention—sections that somehow “jumped out” at you as you read. These might be passages that seem especially important, puzzling, beautiful, strange, well written, controversial, or striking in some other way. Be ready to read these aloud to the group or to ask someone else to read them.

Illustration: On the back of this sheet, quickly sketch a picture related to your reading. This can be a drawing, cartoon, diagram, flowchart—whatever. You can draw a picture of something that's specifically talked about in the text or something from your own experience or feelings, something the reading made you think about. Be ready to show your picture to your group and talk about it.

Figure 2. From *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, second edition by Harvey Daniels. Copyright © 2002. Stenhouse Publishers. All rights reserved.

we work with have had lively conversations about *There Are No Children Here* by Alex Kotlowitz, the all-too-real account of two brothers growing up in a Chicago housing project. *Into Thin Air* and *Into the Wild*, both by John Krakauer, *The Perfect Storm* by Sebastian Junger, and *The Last River* by Todd Balf are true adventure stories with tons of science information and strong narrative lines. *The Big Test* by Nicholas Lehman gives kids a chance to learn about the sordid origins of the SAT test they will all face. More challenging reads are Dava Sobel's books *Longitude* and *Galileo's Daughter*, both of which dramatically recount inventions that changed the world. Patrick Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* offers a chilling and persuasive theory of why Caucasians have been able to dominate and exploit the other peoples of the world for two millennia.

Managing Nonfiction Reading Circles

Whether we are using nonfiction books or shorter pieces, effective “nonfiction circles” will require the same discussion skills as regular fiction circles. Kids need to know how to keep a response log, mark important sections of a text, participate effectively in a group, reflect upon and improve discussions, and so forth. For students who have already done literature circles extensively, these skills should transfer fluidly to nonfiction text. If kids are at an earlier stage, it may be helpful to run through some of the training strategies described in the literature (Daniels, 2002).

One key to effective reading groups is having some kind of “harvesting strategy” while reading. Just as with novels, we want kids to capture their responses as they read and bring to the discussion their questions, connections, feelings, judgments, words, phrases, and doodles. To help kids retain these potentially discussable topics, we have them jot notes in open-ended response logs, on sticky notes they can stick to key spots through the book, or right on the text, if that's appropriate.

Teachers have also developed other tools for capturing readers' responses to nonfiction. One

tool, shown in Figure 2, is designed to help readers in nonfiction groups (where everyone is reading the same text) to enter the text thinking. It reminds kids that as they read, they can visualize, connect, question, savor, notice, and evaluate. When members bring their completed sheets to a

NONFICTION JIGSAW SHEET	
Name _____	
Title of Reading _____	Author _____
<p><i>Everyone in your group is reading something different but related. In order to have a good discussion, everyone will need to both share and connect. To prepare for your group meeting, please respond to the following items, either while you are reading or after you have read.</i></p>	
<p>Summary and reactions: Jot down a brief summary of your reading and some personal reactions you had.</p>	
<p>Connections: What personal connections did you make with the text? Did it remind you of past experiences, people, or events in your life? Did it make you think of anything happening in the news, around school, or in other material you have read?</p>	
<p>Passages: Mark some lines or sections that you could read aloud to help other group members understand this text.</p>	
<p>Illustration: On the back of this sheet, quickly sketch a picture related to your reading. This can be a drawing, cartoon, diagram, flowchart—whatever. You can draw a picture of something that's specifically talked about in the text or something from your own experience or feelings, something the text made you think about. Be ready to show your picture to your group and talk about it.</p>	
<p><i>When the group meets, the discussion will have two stages. First, everyone will take turns identifying his or her reading by author and title, giving a quick summary and a personal reaction. Then, everyone will join in general conversation, comparing and connecting whatever seems valuable and interesting about the readings. You can contribute your passages, illustrations, or other notes wherever they fit.</i></p>	

Figure 3. From *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*, second edition by Harvey Daniels. Copyright © 2002. Stenhouse Publishers. All rights reserved.

small-group discussion, they have an inventory of different “takes” on the text, hopefully enough ideas to sustain an extended conversation.

The second sheet (see Figure 3) is for “jigsaw” groups, where different members are reading different texts on the same subject (e.g., five articles about different types of water pollution) or different sections of a larger text (e.g., different chapters of a book on spiders). The sheet helps students to have the kind of two-stage meeting that heterogeneous readings require. First, everyone takes a turn identifying his or her text and offering a quick summary and personal reaction. Working around the group, everyone can join in general conversation, comparing and connecting the readings. People can contribute their responses, passages, illustrations, or other notes wherever they fit, as the conversation unfolds.

Both of these tools are subject to the same cautions as the “role sheets” often used with literature circles. They can get mechanical if overused, and students may depend upon them too much in discussions, taking turns reading their entries aloud rather than engaging in a free-flowing conversation. To prevent this, have kids hold their meetings with the *sheets face down*, using them only when (and if) they run out of ideas to talk about. It’s also a good idea to move on from role sheets to response logs or sticky notes, which are more open-ended and natural forms of note-taking.

High-Stakes Texts

Yes, it’s definitely a good idea to bring nonfiction into kids’ book clubs. Not only will we be adding a whole new world of engaging text for kids to choose from, it may even help them score better on a reading test someday. Or not. The connec-

tion isn’t simple and the overlaps are partial. Sure, it’s a shame that the expository texts used in standardized reading tests are so different from those that appear in the real world. But it is also *wonderful* that the expository texts in the real world are so different from those on standardized tests. Thank goodness those unengaging and conceptually overloaded test-texts come but once a year!

Of course, students may need to have some exposure to and practice with the peculiar reading passages on those high-stakes texts. After all, the consequences of ignoring them can be pretty severe. But this practice should be confined to brief periods of test coaching right before the state exams, and not confused with the real reading program, which lasts all year and holds a far higher standard of text complexity, authenticity, and engagement. And one consistent element of that reading program should be student-led literature circles—using both fiction and nonfiction of the highest quality.

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